DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 252 075 FL 014 731

AUTHOR Herndon, Marcia; McLeod, Norma
TITLE The Use of Nicknames as Evaluators of Personal Competence in Malta. Sociolinguistic Working Paper.
INSTITUTION Southwest Educational Development Lab., Austin, Tex.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 72
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Competence; Foreign Countries; *Interpersonal Communication; Language Styles; *Musicians; *Peer Evaluation; *Sociocultural Patterns; Sociolinguistics
IDENTIFIERS *Malta; *Nicknames

ABSTRACT

The pragmatic use of nicknames as clarifiers separates the Maltese usage from those so common throughout the world where the nickname is used as a means of hiding identity. The familial character of most nicknames in Malta suggests they are the vestiges of a pre-Christian naming system. The major peculiarity in Malta is in the intermingling of seven naming devices in an evaluative system. The study of evaluative methods reveals a stable set of principles and fluid usage. People are mobile in the system according to their relative ability and the Maltese play with the system and express their personal feelings about others through it, regardless of the correctness of their opinions. In the case of musicians, nicknames are applied based on the musician's competence, and factions develop based on these evaluations and change over time. Personal evaluations used as insults evoke responses that have become institutionalized in the song duel, which creates various interpretations of the evaluation system. The purpose of the duelling is to create a set of situations in which speech is used indirectly in a way that allows for several possible interpretations, representative of some aspects of Maltese society. (MSE)

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THE USE OF NICKNAMES AS EVALUATORS OF PERSONAL COMPETENCE IN MALTA

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FL004731

Sociolinguistic Working Paper

1972

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory
211 East Seventh Street
Austin, Texas

(146)

THE USE OF NICKNAMES AS EVALUATORS OF PERSONAL COMPETENCE IN MALTA

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The Maltese islands are situated between Europe and Africa, at almost the exact geographical center of the Mediterranean. The chain of islands --consisting of Gozo, Comino, and Malta--stretches from Northwest to Southeast, and has a total area of slightly over one hundred square miles.

In 1967, the population was 314,000; population estimates for 1969 placed total figures slightly higher. This means that Malta, with a population density of over 2,660 per square mile, is one of the most densely populated areas in the world.

The primary economic base remains in small farming and fishing enterprises, despite serious attempts to develop a tourist trade. Despite a history of almost continuous occupation for over a thousand years, the level of acculturation is surprisingly low. Some Italian and Sicilian influences may be observed, particularly in the upper class. British influence, however, seems to be limited to an acquired taste for tea and Scotch whiskey, a few loan words in the language, and the use of English in the schools.

Although a dichotomy of nobility and commoners obtained historically and a clear distinction may currently be made between upper and lower classes, the Maltese ideal social model is almost adamantly egalitarian. This was observed by Boissevain (1965; 1969) as well as by the authors of this paper. The Maltese themselves have dozens of proverbs which support this egalitarian ideal. A common expression is "A man can do anything he wants."

In Malta today, a two class system is in operation, and a fairly good argument could be made for an emerging middle class, at least as an economic factor. Basically, however, this remains a two class system in which the upper class knows little or nothing about the lower class, and in which the lower class harbors a deep and abiding fear of vendetta. In both classes (or in all three classes), factionalism is one of the basic realities of life, and cannot be prevented.

Factions

Anthropologists comment that factional situations occur frequently, and often involve two opposing groups. Murdock, for example, observes

> A recurrent feature of community organization, noted by Linton (R. Linton, The Study of Man, 1936:229) is an internal division into factions, usually two in number. We need instance here only the famous Tartharol and Teivaliol divisions of the Todas, the rivalrous districts of Faea and Ravenga on the tiny isle of Tikopia, the "hostile" and "friendly" factions among the Hopi, and the moiety cleavages of the Apinaye and many other tribes. Miner (H.M. Miner, St. Denis, 1939:53-60; 68-69) has described a striking dual alignment in a rural French-Canadian parish, based ostensibly on affiliation with different political parties.
>
> So widespread are such factional divisions, so frequently is their number precisely two, so commonly do they oppose one another in games and other activities, and so often are their reciprocal relations marked by rivalry, boasting, and covert forms of aggression that the phenomenon seems scarcely accidental (Murdock 1949:90).

In Saints and Fireworks (1965), Boissevain devotes a great deal of attention to factions in Malta. He observes that, while unity and egalitarianism are ideals, internal cleavages exist on both the village and national levels. The model he presents is one of dual opposition, with two factions existing in any given area. We observed this same model among musicians in 1969-70. In 1972, however, the situation was less clear-cut, and there were either three or four opposing groups, depending on which factors are taken into account, among musicians.

Superimposed on factionalism are the mobility of musical groups, their relative fluidity, and the nature of the musical performance. It is therefore necessary to describe the musical arena.

The Musical Arena

The various segments of musical activity in Malta may be approached as types of cultural performances, or occasions. According to Milton Singer

> . . . 'cultural performances' . . . include what we in the West usually call by that name--for example, plays, music concerts and lectures. But they include also prayers, ritual readings and recitations, rites and ceremonies, festivals and all those things we usually classify under religion and ritual rather than with the 'cultural' or artistic (Singer 1955:27).

However, some difficulty with the term 'cultural performance' is encountered. Singer (ibid., 27) notes the formal properties of cultural performances as including a specified time limit with a beginning and an end,

an organized program of activity, a set of performers, an audience, and a place and occasion of performance, and views cultural performances as isolatable segments of activity considered by a group of people to be encapsulations of their culture which they can exhibit to visitors and to themselves.

Maltese musical events do not always have an organized program of activity, or a specified time limit. Nor are they considered by those involved in their production to be encapsulations of their culture which they may exhibit. Rather, the context of musical activity in Malta includes a wide range of events with varying degrees of organization and time limitation. There is a set of performers, which may or may not be limited, and which may or may not include, at various times, members of the audience. The place, too, is variable. That musical occasions are encapsulations of culture is certainly true; that they are conscious encapsulations of culture is not so certain.

We therefore refer to the context of musical activity simply as 'the occasion,' a term first used by McLeod (1966). In so doing, we retain most of Singer's criteria for cultural performances, with the exceptions noted above. In addition, the factor of replicability must be included. Although content varies, structure remains basically the same, and may be repeated, particularly where occasions are named events. Thus, an occasion is the encapsulation of culture, having some degree of organization and time limitation, a set of performers, an audience, and a setting.

The musical occasion in Malta may be a paid performance for radio or television, or in a bar, theater, or private home, or it may be an unpaid performance, usually in a bar. The most important musical form which occurs on the occasion is the song duel.

The song duel is a covertly insulting sung poem, in which major emphasis is placed on the sententious content of the impromptu, extemporaneous verses, rather than on melodic line or rhythm. Two men oppose one another in a public arena, creating four-line verses (in a b c b rhyme) which are skillful in the use of the double entendre. No one can 'win' a song duel; there is no overt judging, and the cultural rule in force demands that open conflict should be avoided.

The musical arena becomes significant in Maltese culture in respect to the last statement. Public argument is impossible in daily life because of

the assumed result: vendetta between extended families arising out of a quarrel between two individuals, or witchcraft.

Vendetta is uncommon in Malta, but is nonetheless greatly feared. It is described as arising out of pika, 'pique,' where an individual becomes more than mildly annoyed with another. Should a pika develop between two persons, it is believed that one (usually the individual who feels himself to be the injured party) will sneak out at night and damage property belonging to the other. This might be the cutting of fishing nets, scratching the finish on his car, or other mildly irritating activities. Should the other party publicly speak out, then the two extended families of the individuals would be drawn into the affair, and an unending state of vendetta would begin. In order to avoid this seemingly irreparable state, most people avoid open public quarrels with others.

The alternative course of action is probably not a real one. Witchcraft is said to exist; however, there are no cases of it on record, and while many people believe in witches, all cases collected by the authors represent accusations of witchcraft based on the general Mediterranean belief in the Evil Eye. Witchcraft is said to come into play when one individual is jealous of another. Should a farmer have an especially beautiful mule, any open admiration of the animal would indicate that the admirer was jealous of the owner. Should the animal die subsequent to its being admired, the jealous person is styled a witch.

As a result of this belief, it is regarded as improper to praise another person or his possessions, unless one adds the words "Allah jbirek" (God bless it) to the statement. In ordinary speech where an individual knows another well, praise may also be expressed by an insult. Thus, if one said, "What an ugly baby!", this would be read to mean, "What a beautiful baby!", without the implication of jealousy, and consequently, of witchcraft.

Thus, the fear of vendetta requires that no public quarrel should occur. Conversely, the fear of witchcraft restricts speech patterns involving praise. In such a culture, public song duels would seem totally inappropriate. However, if musical occasions represent encapsulations of culture, then the Maltese song duel must be a way of confronting what is normally avoided. The duel allows the listeners to empathize with two men set up as symbolic poles in a never-ending series of public arguments which

are controlled by severe constraints on the nature of the dialogue. The battle is a mock one; opponents prove their worth by following rules which prevent them from fighting openly, although they may and do fight in the covert arena of the double entendre. Thus, the duelists are the culture's supreme advocates and purveyors of the proper way to linguistically avoid the culture's two major fears.

A series of examples may clarify how the rules of duelling are followed. It will, of course, be impossible to quote all the rules involved. First, in parallel to witchcraft, a compliment in the duel is regarded as an insult. Thus, one could not say directly "You are a good singer," unless the person to whom the praise is directed is a very good friend. Conversely, again following witchcraft, an insult is a compliment. In a duel in 1972, one singer described the authors as women of terrible tempers, who would kill anyone who got in their way. High praise, indeed.

However, an insult can be an insult if what is implied happens to be true. For example, if a singer said to a large man, "You are really very clumsy," this would be a compliment if he were agile, and an insult if he were truly clumsy. From the above, it would appear impossible to actually insult anyone; however, as long as the insult is indirect, it is perfectly all right.

Indirect insults can be achieved in the following ways. A man may be insulted by insulting his village. Thus one singer said "The air in Rabat is so high that whenever I go there, I get a headache." A very rough translation would be, "You're bothering me, bud."

One may also insult a man by using the name of another man who is somehow related to him in the minds of the listeners. Here is an example:

> Have you seen Fredu?
> I last saw him in Victory Square last Thursday.

Fredu is the name of the cousin of the man being insulted. A bomb had exploded in Victory Square the previous Thursday, and the police were looking for an assassin, since a high government official had been scheduled to pass by at the time of the explosion. A rough translation would be: "Fredu's cousin is a traitor, and had better not show up around here in the future."

A direct insult may occur, if it is phrased in double entendre. Thus, a childless man was recently told in duel, "You are a pot without salt."

The point was made even more direct by reference to a man with 16 children as a pot with plenty of salt. The ostensible subject was cooking. Since cooking is women's work in Malta, the double meaning was more poignant yet.

Singers do not necessarily resent such indirect insults. They can, after all, be regarded as compliments. More usually, however, they are taken to mean that the insulter is jealous of them for their greater abilities. Thus, the theme of witchcraft again appears, this time overriding the fear of vendetta. Since the insult is indirect, it cannot be regarded as a quarrel. However, when an indirect insult is given, it can be regarded as a compliment. By this devious reasoning, the singer meant to compliment the person; reversed the compliment to avoid accusations of witchcraft; since witchcraft arises out of jealousy, the man can be thought to be jealous; one is jealous of those who have something better than another; and therefore the insulted person can regard himself as a better musician than the insulter, if he so chooses. The logic is involved, to be sure. It is the very indirectness of the game, and the fact that it is open to various interpretations, that makes of it a national sport, both for the listener and the participant.

Any resort to direct insults is regarded not only as a breach of the rules, but as a real danger. In the past, some singers have lost their tempers, with general free-for-alls as a result. When direct insults are exchanged, the situation is called sfida, 'challenge,' and action should follow. Thus, the audience is taking a chance by being present at a song-duel. However, the general attitude of those who follow the singers is one of fervent hope that something serious will develop. They are forever gossiping to one another about the possibility of a challenge between two singers, and by their gossip attempt to cause a pika between singers. They want to see a real fight, as long as they are not in it. The singers regard their listeners as an annoyance, since they are trying to foment what the rules are so clearly trying to avoid. Singers are the knights of Maltese culture, and they try to play by the rules of the knightly game they have involved themselves in.

We have illustrated only a few of the many rules by which the song duel is performed. The rules of the game are so complex that everyone who plays it well must be a genius. Many young Maltese try to sing, but few can sustain the pressure of improvising verses that follow all the rules

for very long. This is obviously a selective process, in which a few will succeed and many will fail.

Thus, the duel is itself in conflict with the basic ideal view that Malta is an egalitarian society. Further, as we have shown, it is impossible to praise a singer directly. How, then, can singers evaluate the relative merits of one singer against another? One cannot insult another singer by implying that he is not good at the game; this would start a vendetta. One can only compliment a man (and thus insult him) if he is too stupid to know the rules. They cannot even say anything to a third party, because everyone is just waiting to start a fight between singers.

By the rules, then, no one could say anything about the general level of ability of any other singers. This would mean, if true, that singers would be forced to continue to sing with persons not worthy of them. Further, there could be no leaders of singers. Yet both of these consequences are avoided. Every singer knows his relative rank. The status of an individual in the musical community is not static, however. The general opinion of a singer will change daily, depending upon his specific performance on a given occasion. Over a period of years, one gains a relative reputation which is always in danger of being lost.

Relative judgment of worth is effected, as usual, by indirect means. A variety of names are used for the singers, always as reference terms. The wide range of terms possible in the naming process is increased by the presence of nicknames on the island.

Nicknames (laqam)

The use of nicknames in Malta is a necessity. There is only a limited number of surnames in common use in most Maltese villages. Boissevain points out that in Hal-Farrug, for example, there are only fifty-nine surnames represented among 244 households (1969:43). The situation is more complex than this, however. Boissevain continues,

> . . . No less than fifty-five households have the surname Farrugia. Ten of the men of these families are called Martin, after the patron saint of the village. There are almost twice as many younger Martin Farrugia's. Thus, the combination of Christian name and family name is simply not sufficient to distinguish persons, for too many have the same name (1969:43).

An informal survey undertaken by the present authors indicates that Ħa' Farrug is not unusual in its restriction of surnames. The Maltese telephone directory contains 199 pages of names. When businesses and the nobility have been removed, there are only 313 surnames, some of which are represented by a single entry. Seventy-six and one-half pages, or 38.4% of the telephone directory, are occupied by the 37 commonest names. This would indicate that the entire island has only a few surnames, at least among those who have telephones.

In Marsaxlokk, a small village of 200 people, there are six men named Carmenu Bugeja, all of whom are fishermen. Likewise, in a small alley in the village of Zabbar, there are two men with the same name among ten households. When it was announced on the radio several years ago that a man of that name, whose address was this particular alley in Zabbar, had murdered someone, the father-in-law of the other man rushed over to rescue his daughter. With such confusion possible, the use of nicknames becomes a necessity, particularly since name + address or name + occupation will not suffice.

Nicknames are highly varied, and are sometimes referential in nature. Basically, however, there are four types:

1. ta + il + noun
   - Tas-Sinjura (descended from the noblewoman)
   - Tat-Taxi (of the Taxi, used for a taxi driver)
2. il + noun
   - Ir-Ragel (the man)
   - Il-Qamar (the moon)
   - Il-Bies (the blind man)
3. noun alone
   - Taqqala (he who bears down heavily)
   - Gwardarobbi (wardrobe)
   - Bamboccu (idiot)
   - Bocci (marbles)
   - Nofs il-lejl (midnight)
4. first name + name of village
   - Fredu taz-Zabbar (Fred from Zabbar)

Everyone starts with two possible nicknames, from which he chooses one. Each is a family nickname. This is often expressed as taking "my grandfather's nickname" or "my grandmother's nickname." What this really means is that, of four possible nicknames of the grandparents' generation, the individual may choose between only two, those chosen by his own parents. We found no instance in which, if a man's father had chosen one of the grandfather's possible nicknames, the grandson chose the other.

An example may serve to clarify the possible choices involved. John Caccia had, as a child, two possible nicknames: 1) Il-Famfru (the pilot-fish), or 2) Ik-Kwattru (the four). Il-Famfru is his father's nickname; Ik-Kwattru is his mother's nickname. He chose to be known by his mother's nickname.

Several factors are involved in deciding which nickname will be used by an individual. Primarily, there is a general tendency to take one's father's nickname. But the choice almost always goes where the money or land or fishing equipment is. John's mother controls and owns the land in his family, so he chose her nickname. When asked why he did this, John replied, "With money, one can build a highway in the sea." Other considerations, such as particular affection for one parent or another, or public scandal involving someone with the same nickname, may also enter into the decision as to which nickname to take.

It is perfectly possible for all the children in a particular family to have the same nickname, although this is not usually the case. Some children take one nickname, and some take the other. Idiosyncratic nicknames add to the choice. For example, one of the men named Carmenu Bugeja in Marsaxlokk is called "Monseigneur" because he refuses to go to church. In addition, women may take the nickname of their husbands. John Caccia's sister-in-law is married to his cousin, and is called Il-Famfru by her family.

A man or woman marrying into a village is also sometimes known by first name plus natal village. John Caccia's sister-in-law was born in Ghaxxaqq, but now lives in Zejtun. She is known in the village as Marija Tal-Ghaxxaqq, Mary from Ghaxxaqq. This nickname is sometimes used pejoratively. It is the epithet of the stranger.

The nickname is often used as a clarifier in normal speech. Thus, if one wishes to distinguish between two persons of the same name, one may use

the formula first name + surname + nickname. In addition there are numerous cases where village members remember one another by nickname only. This latter seems to imply a consensus on the nickname of a particular person. In fact, some persons are known by several nicknames. For instance, a woman may be known by her own nickname to family members; by her husband's nickname to his acquaintances; and by the formula of first name + village of origin in pejorative situations.

By adding nicknames to the other naming devices, it is possible to list seven types which can be used to identify an individual:

1.	First name plus surname.	John Caccia
2.	First name only.	John or Johnny
3.	Surname only.	Caccia
4.	Nickname only.	Ik-Kwattru
5.	First name plus nickname.	John Ik-Kwattru
6.	First name + surname + nickname.	John Caccia, Ik-Kwattru
7.	First name + village.	John ta'z-Zejtun

Chart I: types of naming possible

The singers have chosen six of these seven possibilities as devices to determine their relative, momentary status to one another. There are only a few men who are considered to be master singers and guitarists. The designation for these few is Type 5, first name + nickname. This would be the form 'John Ik-Kwattru.' A wistful verse on this subject was improvised by Fredu Abela, known also as Bamboccu. Speaking of himself and another singer named Il-Anc (the angel), he sang:

> Tonight we sang of love,
> And I shall love you all my life.
> We shall sing philosophically,
> You shall be more than wife.
> I propose a pact between us
> That we be buried in a single tomb;
> And that upon the stone we write
> "Here lie Fredu Il-Bambocc and Anqelu Il-Anc."

His hope for greatness in his life is here expressed in terms of his all-consuming interest, the song duel.

The other levels of evaluation are listed below in Chart II:

Master singer, leader Male guitarist	Type 5	John Ik-Kwattru
Fine singer or guitarist	Type 4	Ik-Kwattru
Fair singer, all females	Type 2	John, Johnny
Barely acceptable singer, accompanying guitarist	Type 3	Caccia
Bad musicians	Type 1	John Caccia
Returned emigrants who are not yet in the system	Type 7	John taz-Zejtun

Chart II: evaluation by naming

A singer's status is any one of these categories is momentary, and depends entirely upon the relative evaluation of the speaker. The last category, those who are not yet in the system, shows the greatest degree of variation. As an example, Zarenu Ellul from the village of Ghaxxaqq went to Australia for a number of years. Upon his return, he married and settled matrilocally in the village of Tarxien. Although he had sung in his youth, upon his return to Malta he was an unknown quantity and was referred to as 'Zarenu tat-Tarxien.' Two years later, he had moved in well, and was then known as 'Zorru,' a short form of Zarenu (this latter because there are too many Zarenu's).

In contrast, Indri Farrugia, originally from Mosta, has been in the United States for twenty-two years, but keeps in contact with the native singers by tape. He has a fine voice, and is regarded by all singers as excellent. Upon his return to Malta for a visit, he was invited to sing with everyone, but was still known as 'Indri Tal-Mosta,' because he is not in the system.

Yet another foreign singer presents different case. The leader of the Australian song duelists of Maltese extraction is known in Malta by his nickname, 'Mony,' because he regularly visits Malta, sends tapes to friends, and supports a weekly radio program of Maltese folk music from Australia. Thus, even though he is not a resident of the islands, he is considered to

be in the system by reason of his active participation in it.

There is less movement in the other categories, although such motion does occur. As a young singer gets better by working and thinking, listening and talking with a master singer, he may well move up in the system. Older singers, on the other hand, may move down as they become less able to sustain the frantic pace. A striking example is that of Il-Bies, a blind singer who was once considered to be one of the greatest musicians on the islands. In 1969, he was always referred to as Pawlu Il-Bies, if the action discussed was past, but simply as Il-Bies, or Bies, if the action discussed was present. One singer said of him, sadly, "now he's getting very old, and his mind is going. He is not the man he once was." The fortunes of this singer have changed, however; upon our return in 1972, he had shown a recovery of status. "He's thinking more clearly these days," said one man. He is now once more referred to as Pawlu Il-Bies in the present circumstance.

Other criteria than musical ability may also enter into the reference term in use at a given time. Singers are organized into opposing factions, as mentioned earlier. The leader of one faction, a fine singer named Pawlu Seychell, was known by members of his faction as 'Pawlu l-Ghannej' ('the Singer,' a fortuitous nickname, but not an idiosyncratic one; this is his family nickname). But members of the other faction in 1969-70 called him 'Pawlu Seychell,' thus reducing him from a master singer to a bad musician.

Hence, although the distinctions are clear in their minds, they tend to play with the system. For example, a mentally retarded illiterate named Nardu Attard tries to sing. The permissiveness of the system is such that everyone sings with him. The other singers like to sing with Nardu, because he makes consistent mistakes and does not understand any of the insults. Although his preferred nickname is Im-Mahla (launch-ramp), everyone calls him It-Tusieh (fatty), and in so doing make subtle fun of him.

An example of the flexibility of the system occurred at a recent Imnarja (the feast at which all Maltese singers gather). During this two day feast of St. Peter and St. Paul a public folksinging contest occurs, in which the winner is awarded a silver cup. Unfortunately, the judges of the contest are members of the upper class, and rarely know the complex rules of the song duel. During the feast, Nardu Attard approached one of the better singers of the island, who said to him, "Mela! Im-Mahla It-Tusieh!,"

thus implying that Nardu was a master singer. Nardu swelled with pride, and announced that he was entering the competition. To everyone's surprise, he won. A few days later, a singer rushed up to us on the street and said, "Did you hear who won the Imnarja? Nardu Attard! My God, what's the world coming to?"

Conclusion

The pragmatic use of nicknames as clarifiers separates the Maltese usage from those so common throughout the world where the nickname is used as a means of hiding the real identity of an individual. Nor does nickname usage fall into the Sicilian or Spanish pattern, where nicknames are insults which are not used in a person's presence (Boissevain 1969:43). The familial character of most nicknames in Malta may indicate that they are the vestiges of a previous naming system now superceded by Christian usage.

The major peculiarity in the Maltese case rests in the intermingling of naming devices, thus placing them on an equal footing with one another. It is impossible to consider the nickname as a separate entity here, and this fact had led the authors to use the term 'naming device,' as a cover term for the seven types of naming we recorded. By so doing, we were able to understand the evaluative system described above.

The study of evaluative methods in Malta has revealed the presence of a stable set of principles combined with a fluid usage. The fluidity lies in two areas: 1) people are mobile within the system in terms of their relative ability; and 2) the Maltese play with the system, and through it express their personal feelings about others, regardless of whether their evaluation is correct or not.

This study covers only the use of naming devices by musicians. The authors cannot substantiate a wider usage of the principles. There is a possibility that the system is more widespread. Boissevain hints at this in his discussion of the use of First name + village of origin (our Type 7):

> Because of the many ties which bind people to their villages of birth, an adult who moves into his wife's village remains an outsider for many years. The village will probably not give him a distinctive village nickname, and he will be known simply as the husband of his wife, or perhaps by the name of his native village. Although the village may ignore his outside origin for much of the time, his place

> of birth is certain to be remembered and held against him by his enemies, should be (sic) become involved in a dispute (1965:37).

As mentioned earlier, the use of naming devices in a patterned way is one of the many varieties of indirectness which are necessarily characteristic of Maltese speech. Because of this, it is possible for each person to have his own interpretation of a single event or person. The fluidity of naming devices is thus matched to that of the general culture. As a result, it is difficult to create a rigid model for the society which will be operative. The Maltese ideal is that of total egalitarianism. This ideal is carried out fairly frequently. Among musicians, this is expressed in a high degree of permissiveness, and explains why great musicians will sing with poor ones, or even with children.

Boissevain's structural model for villages is one of a deep and abiding factionalism which is never resolved. Our own work tended to reveal a two-part factional system among musicians during 1969 and 1970. However, upon our return in 1972, we found that while factionalism still existed, its character had changed significantly. Groups of singers had changed sides; new groups had formed; and it was now clearer that a dualistic view of Maltese social organization might be incorrect. One may defend the concept of factionalism in Malta, but a rigid dichotomy does not seem to be in operation, at least among musicians.

This would follow logically from the assumption that most personal evaluations and response to the insult patterns are viewed differently by each individual. A structural model which sets people off against one another as a group phenomenon is not logical if each individual is free to interpret the system in one of any number of ways. Further, the process of creating various interpretations is institutionalized in the song duel. To return to Singer's concept, if cultural performances encapsulate cultural ideals, then a view of Maltese society which is solely egalitarian or solely factional is a gloss over another system which implies both. The entire purpose of duelling is to create a set of situations in which speech is used indirectly in such a way as to allow for several possible interpretations.

In the authors' view, the very obfuscation implied by the song duel in Malta is the master model. In any deep analysis of cultural behavior, we

feel, a rigid model will be incorrect. Rather, one will locate patterns against which people play with greater or lesser skill. And the play's the thing.

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